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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Monday, August 3, 1931

(NOT FOR PUBLICATION)

Subject: "Campfire Meals." Information approved by the Bureau of Home Economics U.S.D.A.

Bulletin available: "Cooking Beef According to the Cut."

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Outdoor meals are the fashion these days. And they are of all kinds and varieties,- good, poor and so-so, as Uncle Ebenezer would say. - There are the deviled egg and thermos-bottle coffee picnics eaten hastily by the roadside. And there are the conventional potato salad, sandwich and layer cake meals served on a paper table cloth on a picnic-ground table.

But for a real treat, give me any day a campfire meal, cooked on the spot by someone who knows the art of outdoor cookery. Food cooked over a wood fire or on hot flat stones or even on a camp stove, and eaten hot then and there, can taste better to me than a ten-course meal cooked by the finest French chef.

Successful outdoor cookery is not difficult, but it does require a little knowledge and skill. Most good campfire cooks declare that meals cooked this way are not only more appetizing but also easier to plan, carry and prepare than the deviled-egg-and-chocolate-layer-cake sort.

Equipment, they tell me, is most important. Alice may be a most competent cook in her own, beautifully equipped kitchen, but, out on the beach or in the woods over an open fire, she's often quite lost. After being used to working with so many modern conveniences, this simple, primitive cooking seems difficult. Only a few utensils are used. And for that reason they should be exactly suited to campfire conditions. Many of the pots and pans so useful in the kitchen are awkward and unsuitable outdoors. Long-handled kettles, for example, are clumsy to carry. The handles take up so much room and they become black and hot over the campfire. Small buckets that fit inside each other are a better choice.

So select your camp cookery set with care and keep it clean and assembled, all ready to go when the outdoors calls. And don't be tempted to keep out any part of it for regular use in the kitchen or it may not be ready when you want it.

I have consulted several experienced campers recently--campers whose meals I know are successful because I've tasted them. I want to get their advice on what to put in the cookery kit.

- - "A long-handled fork," the first one said. "And some kind of a metal grip or lifter for hot pans to save burned fingers."

"A set of those nice, straight-sided kettles that fit inside each other," suggested the second camper. He added that sporting goods stores always sold these outfits.

Still another outdoor man spoke for a frying pan with a detachable handle, and a straight-sided coffee pot with a small spout welded in one piece with the rest of the pot. To hold water he recommended both a canteen and a collapsible canvas water bucket. Other suggestions were salt and pepper shakers with tops to keep contents from sifting out while they are being carried. Of course, a canvas sack is always needed to carry the kit in.

All three campers said the outfit should be compact above all things--easy to carry, light in weight, carefully fitted to conserve space.

As for advice about caring for that kit, I got lots of that. Many good campers, it seems, take their dish cloth and soap with them and bring the utensils home clean. Nothing is messier than packing dishes dirty with food; nothing drearier than unpacking them the next day. But it isn't necessary to overdo the cleaning business. Black is the correct color for the outside of the kettles and frying pans. No use scouring off the black made by the wood fire smoke after each meal. Simply keep a supply of news papers on hand. Use them to wipe off the kettles, inside and out. Then lay paper between each cooking dish when packing them to keep it from soiling its neighbor.

So much for the equipment. Now for the fire. That really deserves a lot more time than we can give it today. The simplest kind of outdoor fireplace is made by two walls almost parallel to each other, but with one end slightly wider than the other. The wind should enter the wider end. The length depends on how many cooking dishes are to be used. The width should range from a little less the diameter of the frying pan at the wide end to four inches or less at the narrow end. For walls it may have flat stones, a couple of green logs, or the sides of a trench built in the sand. Every woodsman I've ever met says to use a small fire because it is so much easier to handle. Before starting any fire, better have on hand an orderly pile of dry, seasoned wood in assorted sizes--none longer or larger than the fireplace.

Many good camp cooks use grates. Over a foundation of stones the grate from your gas oven may be used. Regular camping grates have four folding legs to plant firmly in the ground. A meat broiler with a long handle is the best thing for broiling meats and fish.

And the food? Yes, I'm really coming to that now. You can cook over an open fire almost anything that you can cook over a gas or electric stove at home. But don't try to cook too many dishes at once. Whenever possible at a camp meal it's nice to feature some dishes that are especially delicious cooked over an open fire--broiled steak, for example, or roasted potatoes, or roasted corn. Some of the easy foods to cook this way are flapjacks or pancakes, bacon and corn, bacon and eggs and spaghetti or rice dishes with cheese and tomato.

Try cooking your next meal outdoors on the spot. Here's a menu for it. Broiled steak; Roast corn on the cob; Pickles; Rolls; Lettuce and tomato salad; Fresh peaches or other fruit for dessert; coffee for the grown-ups and cocoa for the children, which may be prepared at home.

Steak broiled outdoors has, as everyone knows, its own special delicious flavor and an odor so tempting that it has been known to bring tears of joy to strong men's eyes. The best steaks for campfire use are about an inch, or an inch and a half thick--not too thick to become well-done over a bed of coals. Cut the steak in narrow strips which can be easily handled on a roasting fork or easily turned in a broiler. These small strips also are convenient to slip in rolls or sandwiches.

How to broil the steak? By the same method given in the leaflet called "Cooking Beef According to the Cut." Sear over the hottest coals, first on one side and then on the other. Then move the steak a little farther from the heat and turn it occasionally until it is brown and done.

As for the roast corn, there's a secret to keeping it juicy and tender and preventing its burning on one side and being raw on the other side, as sometimes happens. Use fresh sweet corn and leave the husks on. Dip the ear, husks and all, into a pail of water. Then lay them on the grate over a very hot bed of coals. The water turns into steam within the husk and thus steams the corn inside. Some campers roast their corn right in the ashes, but it is easier to cook it evenly on the grate. If you like your corn brown, remove a few of the husks and let the rest burn off after the corn has been well-steamed.

Tomorrow: "Canning August Vegetables."